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Background on East Timor and US Policy

The Indonesian invasion and occupation of East Timor ranks as one of the great atrocities of this century. It has claimed the lives of 200,000 Timorese* – one-third of the original population. It has been done in defiance of the UN Security Council, which has twice called on Jakarta to withdraw "without delay." And it has also, sadly, been done with the crucial support of the United States, which gave advance approval for the 1975 invasion, then doubled Indonesia's military aid, then blocked the United Nations from taking effective enforcement action, and continues, to this day, to send new arms.

But now, a bipartisan movement in Congress and at the US grassroots has set out to reverse our government's mistaken course. Since the November 12, 1991 Santa Cruz Cemetery massacre – in which Indonesian troops armed with American M-16s gunned down more than 200 Timorese civilians – Congress has taken a series of initiatives which have begun to shift the direction of US policy.

After the massacre, 52 Senators (led by Malcolm Wallop R, Wyoming and Claiborne Pell, D, Rhode Island) wrote to President Bush, calling for the US actively to support implementation of the UN resolutions on East Timor "with an eye toward a political solution that might end the needless suffering in East Timor and bring about true self-determination for the territory." (It was the first of a series of bipartisan House and Senate letters reaffirming support for self-determination.)

In October, 1992, after a series of statements by Indonesian officials indicating that the massacre was an act of policy**, Congress voted to cut off Indonesia's IMET military training aid. The cutoff amendment was initiated by Reps. Tony Hall (D, Ohio) and Ronald Machtley (R, Rhode Island), and had crucial backing in committee from Sen. Patrick Leahy (D, Vermont) and Rep. David Obey (D, Wisconsin). The cutoff was opposed by the State Department, the Pentagon, lobbyists for the Indonesian military, and some US corporations.

In March, 1993, under pressure from Congress, the State Department reversed its traditional pro-Jakarta stand and cosponsored a successful resolution at the UN Human Rights Commission criticizing Indonesian abuses in East Timor.

In July, 1993, again under Congressional pressure, the State Department blocked a transfer of US F-5 fighter planes from the government of Jordan to Indonesia, citing human rights as one of the reasons. The *Jakarta Post* editorialized that the blockage of the F-5 deal "resounded like [a] sonic boom" in Indonesia.

That same month, President Clinton, in response to a letter from 43 Senators, raised the Timor issue in a meeting with Suharto, the Indonesian dictator.

In September,1993, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee unanimously adopted an amendment by Sen. Russell Feingold (D, Wisconsin) which conditions major arms sales to Indonesia on human rights improvements in East Timor. The amendment was a compromise version worked out after extensive negotiation with the White House, the Pentagon, and the State Department. Senator Nancy Kassebaum (R, Kansas) said that the amendment will "get strong support from the entire United States Senate [and] send a very important message to Indonesia about our concerns regarding human rights." A senior White House official commented that the compromise version passed by the committee gave the administration "the necessary flexibility" to pursue its various policy goals with Indonesia. "It allows us to continue the relationship and dialogue, but still makes clear the points that are felt strongly by many in Congress and the administration. (*The Age* [Australia], Sept. 22, 1993)."

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* *The death toll estimate was first published by Amnesty International and was confirmed in 1990 by the Indonesian army intelligence chief for Timor, and this year by the Indonesian-appointed governor.*

** *Gen. Try Sutrisno, now Indonesia's Vice President, said: "Such people must be shot and we will shoot them." Gen. Herman Mantiri, the new regional commander for East Timor, said that the massacre was "quite proper" since "They were opposing us, demonstrating, even yelling things against the government."*

The Feingold amendment sent political shock waves through Jakarta, though the authorization bill containing it never reached the Senate floor. At the same time, although the administration had signed off on the compromise amendment, some individual officials – notably Assistant Secretary of State Winston Lord – mounted a campaign to keep the Feingold amendment from being attached to another legislative vehicle. They were joined by lobbyists for weapons manufacturers, one of whom told the *Legal Times*, "There's a spirit in Congress of trying to use human rights as a club to use against Third World countries. Every time a human-rights issue comes up, they jump on it and say, 'Let's cut off arms sales to Bongo Bongo.'"

Despite such opposition, though, some within the administration are pushing for a thorough change in US policy. During his campaign Bill Clinton said that the US approach to East Timor has been "unconscionable." Last May, Vice President Gore said that the government of Indonesia has committed an "outrage... against the people of East Timor." He said, "[t]he history of the conflict there is long and complex, but the essence of the injustice is starkly simple. Unarmed innocent people in their homeland have been killed and imprisoned and mistreated." Last September, at a press conference, President Clinton turned aside the argument that pressuring Indonesia on East Timor and human rights would have an adverse impact on US business. He said, "The United States does have a very strong position on human rights, and I think we should... (b)ut that has not undermined our... commercial relationships... with countries that we think are making an honest effort to shoot straight with us and to work with us... We have questions about the issues of East Timor... but we have had good contact with Indonesia." (In fact, US companies have no investments in East Timor. Though US weapons firms might indeed be hurt by a ban or cutback on weapons sales, it would not affect US companies in Indonesia which are engaged in other lines of business. Their relationship with Jakarta is one of mutual profit – a basic fact unaffected by Timor policy).

Earlier this year, in the wake of the Feingold amendment, the State Department imposed a ban on small arms sales to Indonesia. Although it is not yet clear which items the ban covers or how long it will stay in force, it represents the first time that such an across-the-board prohibition has been imposed on any type of weapons sale to Indonesia. Some administration officials say that the ban will be used as political cover for approval of upcoming large-scale weapons sales, including a pending deal for F-16s. (There is good reason for skepticism about the ban, given the reaction of the State Department and the Pentagon to the 1992 IMET cutoff. Despite warnings from Senators Leahy and Pell that they were defying Congressional intent, they have continued to train Indonesian officers – the only difference is that now Jakarta foots the bill.) But regardless of officials' current intentions, the small arms ban sets an important precedent: it represents tacit acceptance on the part of the State Department of the principle that withholding weapons sales can advance human rights. Now the issue becomes: what kind of sales should be withheld? And, why, if Jakarta's armed forces continue to defy the Security Council, should the US provide them with any weapons sales at all?

Since the 1991 massacre, the State Department has licensed more than 250 military sales to Indonesia. The items sold have ranged from machine guns and M-16s to electronic components and communications gear and spare parts for attack planes. Every shipment sends a political message that the Indonesian armed forces and their illegal occupation of East Timor still enjoy US government support. The US should end those sales and inform the UN Secretary General that it is now willing to support enforcement of the Security Council resolutions. This would mean supporting the call of Bishop Belo of East Timor for a UN - supervised referendum in which the Timorese would freely choose their own political status.

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